DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 207 233 RA 014 031

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TITLE Cultural Awareness of Minority Groups: Some Implications for School-Community Interaction.
PUB DATE 17 Aug 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration (35th, Seattle, WA, August 16-21, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Education; Administrator Role; *Communication Problems; *Communication Skills; Cross Cultural Training; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Influences; Cultural Traits; Culture Conflict; Elementary Secondary Education; Minority Group Influences; Racial Relations; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Intercultural Communication

ABSTRACT

Interaction between minority groups and local schools can be improved through increased cultural awareness by schools. School districts' responsiveness to the dominant social influences of the local community, coupled with minorities' reluctance to participate in school affairs, has helped deprive minority children of exposure to the unique elements of their ethnic heritage. Cultural differences between minorities and school personnel in such elements as grammar, style, gestures, and postures lead to communication problems. Administrators must become more aware of cultural differences and improve their own intercultural communications skills. Institutions responsible for training educational administrators can help to alleviate such communication problems by providing courses and workshops on cross-cultural communication. (JEH)

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Cultural Awareness of Minority Groups: Some Implications For School-Community Interaction

A Paper Presented to the 35th Annual Conference of Professors of Educational Administration at Seattle, Washington, on August 17, 1981

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EA 014 031

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CULTURAL AWARENESS OF MINORITY GROUPS: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL-COMMUNITY INTERACTION

The theme of the 35th Annual Conference of Professors of Educational Administration is, "Effective Schooling: Implications for Training Administrators." In keeping with the conference theme this professor would like to point out the need to include Intercultural Communication, in the preparatory programs for school administrators, as a means to improving school-community interaction. Intercultural Communication is also referred to as Cross-Cultural Communication, Interethnic Communication and Transracial Communication.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural Communication embraces two major concepts, communication and culture, terms which lack precise definitions in the social sciences. For the sake of this paper communication will be defined as "any behavior that is perceived and interpreted by another, whether or not it is spoken or intended or even within the person's conscious awareness."[1] Casmir defines culture as "the values, experiences, precepts and other lasting factors which have been transmitted by human beings through generations, or certainly over a period of time involving more than one generation, because they were considered to be of some value in the maintenance of human society and the survival of its individual members."[2] "Intercultural Communication occurs whenever a message producer is a member of one culture and the message receiver is a member of another."[3]

Thus this paper will deal with a number of aspects relating to interaction between people who have different cultural backgrounds. This writer is making several basic assumptions which should be stated early. First it is assumed that interaction between minority groups and schools can be improved. Second, it is this writer's belief that cultural awareness of minority groups can enhance community interaction with the school or school district.

The Effects of Acculturation

According to Leonard Valverde, "a universal relationship of schools in multicultural communities has been that the courtship between school and community has rarely been consummated into a loving state of marriage."[4] Robert Havighurst claims that, "minority groups who wanted to keep their ethnic identity and to pass it on to their children saw the school as helps or hindrance, depending on the school program."[5]

In the past public school districts were responsive to the dominant social influence of the communities of which they were a part. Through acculturation minorities were deprived of their language, values, power, self-concept, literature, music and art. America was to become a melting pot. But former U. S. Commissioner of Education, James Allen believes that "the day of the melting pot is over." Allen writes that "no longer is it the ideal of each minority to become an indistinguishable part of the majority." He feels that, "today each strives to maintain its identity while seeking its rightful share of the social, economic, and political fruits of our system."[6]

The multiethnic theorist even "envisions an 'open society' in which individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and social class groups have equal opportunities to function and participate."[7] But the perceptions of minority group members are quite different. The view of one group is revealed in testimony before the Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity to the United States Senate. The Committee reports that "Hispanics in this country often see themselves as the powerless victims of an educational system - run by a professional and political establishment which systematically excludes them from the process by which schools are governed, and from the decisions made about the education of their children."[8]

Historically, Blacks, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans "have not seen themselves as a significant part of school affairs or of the

total educational process. Only recently have they been included in textbooks and other instructional materials."[9] Today with the end of the melting pot theory schools must interact more with Blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Native Americans and all other minorities who are culturally different.

Problems in School-Community Interaction

Cultural differences between minority groups and the dominant culture can present real problems for school administrators in their attempt to communicate. For instance, "the language of blacks is shown to differ from that of whites in ethnography, grammar and style. Black English which has systematically developed, through the process of pidginization-creolization-decreolization, is used by about eighty percent of blacks in America."[10]

The cultural differences in nonverbal communication between minority groups and the dominant culture are also important not only because some of the nonverbal behaviors are foreign to the other group, but also because those which have a resemblance may convey an altogether different message.[11] For example, "a smile in Anglo-American culture usually means happiness, often assent. For the Asian-American it may communicate not only these sentiments, but anger, embarassment, rejection, and other emotions as well."[12]

"Specific nonverbal differences between minorities and whites are noted in kinesic features such as eye movement, walking, gestures, and interaction postures, as well as in temporal use."[13] While Anglo-Americans think of "shifty eyes or unwillingness to look someone in the face as a negative, even suspicious trait, Asian-Americans and some Hispanics consider it disrespectful and rude to look directly at a person to whom they are speaking."[14] "Briefly turning the back on others while interacting with them is often observed among blacks, a sign of trust, which is different from face-to-face emphasis of the dominant culture."[15]

Body contact is another implicit communication response which differs from culture to culture. For instance, "although an affectionate pat on a small child's arm would generally be understood by Asian-Americans, touching a young person on the head is offensive to them."[16] And "while a loud voice and hearty greeting may be welcomed by most Anglos, to the Asian-American these actions are rude and unseemly in a person of authority."[17]

Different cultural values between Anglo and minority members may also present problems in school-community interaction. For instance, Valverde points out "that many Hispanics hold the position that....personality development and character building are regarded to be the province of, and are believed to be provided by, the family unit." He says, "in contrast, the Anglo-American attitude toward schooling is more comprehensive, including not only the technical domain but also the philosophical and attitudinal domains."[18]

According to Sitaram and Haapanen much of the existing research supports two general propositions about values and communication. First, values are communicated, both explicitly and implicitly, through symbolic behavior. Second, the way in which people communicate is influenced by the values they hold.[19] School administrators must not only understand the values of minority groups but should adapt their communication to these values.

The Role of the University

Because of the differences within ethnic cultures school administrators are often unable to communicate effectively and this ineffective communication frequently results in conflict between ethnic groups.[20] Administrators must become more culturally aware of the differences which exist among minority groups and they must also strive to improve their own behavioral skills in Intercultural Communication.

Institutions of higher learning responsible for the training of educational administrators can help school administrators to become more culturally

aware and assist them in developing Intercultural Communication skills. Intercultural Communication instruction could be integrated into a school-community relations class or a school public relations program. A separate cultural awareness of minority groups course, which would include an Intercultural Communication component, could be added to the curriculum. William Gudykunst provides another approach to teaching Intercultural Communication. He describes how Intercultural Communication Workshops (ICW), which are based on theories of laboratory training, seek to develop more positive cross-cultural attitudes and to increase cross-cultural interaction by totally emerging the students in the learning process.[21] Perhaps one of the most unique approaches to the teaching of Intercultural Communication is the one described by Clay Warren from the University of Hawaii. Professor Warren offered a course in Intercultural Communication aboard the S.S. Universe Campus as it voyaged around the world during a semester at sea. Warren calls this pedagogical strategy "Experiform Instruction" and described it as an experiential strategy (not a series of experiential simulations) through which the method become the course.[22]

Whatever approach universities use, one thing seems for certain. Cross-cultural communication can be improved. As American schools become more culturally pluralistic, minority groups need to be involved more in interaction between their school and community.

Waters and Young say that in communicating with minority groups, school administrators must convey to minority publics an attitude that: You are a part of us; We want you involved; We are anxious to help; and We have a problem and need your help.[23]

By including Intercultural Communication in the training of educational administrators universities will be taking a big step toward making them more aware of the culturally different in their communities and better able to communicate with minority groups.

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